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SUBJECT: POKHARA: STUNNED NEPALI TOURIST TOWN COPES WITH VIOLENT PROTESTS

REF: A. KATHMANDU 948
[1](#)B. KATHMANDU 931
[1](#)C. KATHMANDU 944
[1](#)D. KATHMANDU 934

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty, reasons 4.1 (b/d)

[11.](#) (C) Summary: During an April 8-10 visit to the tourist city of Pokhara, A/DCM witnessed an almost total lockdown of the city in the wake of occasionally violent demonstrations, the fatal shooting of one protestor, vandalism of government property and widespread road blockages during a general strike called by the seven-party alliance. Senior civilian and military authorities attempted to convey a sense of control while acknowledging that the level of unrest in the city was unprecedented and their inability to predict how long it would take for conditions to return to normal. The senior civil administrator evinced some unease at the way security forces, in particular the Army, had responded to the protests, while the Army itself was defensive about its conduct. The police emphasized the restraint shown by their forces. The security forces blamed Maoist infiltrators for provoking violence and alleged that the Parties were being used by the Maoists and had no control over the demonstrations. Both the security forces and the National Human Rights Commission asked for additional U.S. support. End summary.

A Tourist Town Locked Down After Violence

[12.](#) (C) From April 8-10, A/DCM visited Pokhara, a city of about 200,000 residents in midwestern Nepal, to take the pulse of the third-largest city in Nepal, which has been the residence of King Gyanendra for much of 2006. Pokhara is a popular tourist destination and jumping-off point for many foreign trekkers seeking an up-close view of the Annapurna range of the Himalayas. Unexpectedly, during the visit, demonstrations in Pokhara associated with the general strike called by the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) turned violent and the city was slapped with its first-ever daytime curfews on April 9-10. Not only were regular businesses closed down, tourists were stranded in their hotels, unable even to stroll the town's lakeside district. (Note: On April 10 a Japanese

tourist was beaten by police, causing other foreign tourists to mount a mini-demonstration the following day "in solidarity with the people of Nepal." (ref A) End note.) Tour groups either attempted to cut short their stays or kept a very low profile. During much of his stay, A/DCM's diplomatic-plated car was the only vehicle on the streets, other than security force vehicles and a few NGO vehicles with "human rights" painted prominently on their sides. On one occasion, residents near A/DCM's hotel conveyed a not-so-friendly warning to A/DCM's driver to stay off the roads or face trouble.

¶13. (C) A/DCM encountered many roadblocks, usually comprised of large stones or downed trees or power poles and burning tires, on the streets of various districts of the city. He also witnessed a number of confrontations between protestors and police. In most such incidents the police were quite restrained, although the odd policeman, feeling provoked, would break ranks to poke a protestor with his baton or otherwise physically confront protestors. Several incidents were marked by rock-throwing, mostly by teenage boys who seemed as much motivated by thrill-seeking as anything else. During one incident, at Birendra Chowk on the southern outskirts of the city, demonstrators, led by irate middle-aged women but backed by rock-throwing young men, pushed forward repeatedly, compelling a line of policemen equipped with shields and riot gear to retreat. This incident was peacefully resolved when vehicles of two local human rights organizations arrived, and activists interceded with both sides to successfully avoid serious violence.

Senior Civil Administrator Uncomfortable

¶14. (C) On April 10 A/DCM held a series of meetings with senior government officials and human rights activists, which offered differing perspectives on the dramatic events of the previous two days. The Chief District Officer (CDO), Madhav Regmi, a career Home Ministry civil servant, described the situation as "tense." Noting the authorities were "trying to maintain law and order," he pointed out that the 12-hour curfew of the previous day and the 11-hour curfew that day constituted an "extreme" situation, unprecedented in Pokhara, which he described as a peaceable tourist town where residents generally focused on their own business. The people now, however, were in "an aggressive mood." Protestors attacked and burned three local government buildings (ward headquarters) and other government property. In one incident, eight vehicles were dragged across the street to form a roadblock. Noting that the seven parties had said the protests would be peaceful -- which they had not been -- the CDO criticized the Parties for "not taking responsibility" for the protests. He said there was no hard evidence to indicate that Maoists had instigated or directed the protests, but he suspected that this factor might be present.

¶15. (C) A/DCM asked Regmi about the April 8 fatal shooting of protestor Bhimsen Dahal (ref B), a 34 year-old internet cafe proprietor and United Marxist Leninist (UML) party activist from Kavre district, in front of the Nepal Telecom Office in downtown Pokhara. Regmi said this had been the action of a single RNA soldier and was "very regrettable." The RNA, Regmi continued, claimed the soldier had acted in self-defense and to protect property. The police had retreated and an angry crowd had begun to throw stones at the Telecom building; a soldier on the roof fired into the crowd, fatally wounding Dahal. Regmi pointed out that the RNA had informed him that the soldier was in custody and an investigation proceeding. Regmi hastened to add, "I am chief of the district and am fully committed to human rights and constitutional law, in spirit and in letter." He pointed out that there were different security forces, receiving different levels of training. Some of the forces were from other parts of the country and had little understanding of local conditions in Pokhara. His own policy, the CDO

explained, was to use "less force" while still preserving life and property. He contrasted the RNA's performance with that of the police, who were "trying to show patience" with demonstrators and again regretted "the very unfortunate action by one soldier."

¶6. (C) Regmi doubted Pokhara would return to normal over the next three to four days. (Note: This has been borne out; violence continued through at least April 12. End note.) The CDO noted the District Security Board, of which he is the chairman, had had to bring in security forces from outside Pokhara to protect the city. This left outlying villages with "very few detachments" to protect them from the Maoists. Concluding, Regmi (please protect) opined that the King's protracted stay in Pokhara was "the main cause" of the Parties' agitation in the city and brightened when A/DCM mentioned that the monarch was expected to return to Kathmandu on April 13 (a fact apparently not known to him).

Major General Commanding Blames Maoists for Unrest

¶7. (C) A/DCM next met with Major General Amar Panta, RNA Western Division Commander. Panta began by noting that the RNA's main task in Pokhara was to back up the police. Introducing the subject of the April 8 fatal shooting, he pointed out that the RNA had been tasked a number of years ago to guard the Nepal Telecom facility owing to its strategic importance. Panta described a scenario at the Telecom building in which "hooligans" advanced, throwing stones and breaking windows and driving the police back. The crowd was on the verge of breaking into the building when one of the sentries posted on the roof fired three warning shots and called to the protestors below to back off. When they did not, afraid for his own security, he fired one shot at

the leader of the protest, killing him -- "a very sad incident," in Panta's words. Panta confirmed that the soldier in question was under confinement and that a military investigation was underway.

¶8. (C) Panta noted that mobs had attacked a number of municipal offices and partially destroyed them. Although he admitted there was "no evidence," Panta believed that the April 10 demonstration that led to the death of Dahal was instigated by Maoists. Handing A/DCM an HMGN translation of Maoist leader Prachanda's April 9 statement (ref C), the general said crowds throughout the country were following the Maoist lead and attacking government facilities and pulling down government signs and statues of the King and his predecessors. (Note: Royal statue topplings began early in the general strike, before Prachanda's statement was issued. End note.) Repeatedly asserting that he was not a politician but a man in uniform, Panta opined that the vast majority of protests around the country were being directed by Maoists and following tactics laid down by Prachanda and fellow Maoist leader Bhattarai; the seven parties were merely dupes in implementing their agenda.

RNA Says It's Winning Battle for Hearts and Minds, Morale on Upswing ...

¶9. (C) General Panta contended that in rural villages the RNA was winning the battle for hearts and minds and that the King was still popular, even revered. The RNA was not merely sitting in cantonments but present in over 100 forward operating bases in his sector alone, and patrolling from those bases. He dismissed as bad journalism reports that RNA morale was low, opining that it was based on a few ambushes of troops who were essentially non-combatants such as road construction personnel. Panta pointed to a significant RNA "victory" over Maoists in the town of Butwal (ref D), on the western edge of his military district, which had raised troops' morale, as had another tactical success at Toulihawa in Kapilbastu district, site of a roughly concurrent Maoist

attack. At Butwal the Maoists had attacked a brigade headquarters, and at Toulihawa a battalion headquarters, and "we repulsed them thoroughly," Panta boasted. Noting that the Maoists had four divisions of about 1,000 troops each within his district, Panta said all four had been engaged in this attempt to capture two of the district's main positions and "completely failed." Panta judged that this constituted a Maoist attempt to distract the authorities' attention from the need to protect the cities from concerted, Maoist-led violent actions there several days later. Most of the public in Pokhara, however, had not participated in the demonstrations and the RNA and police were able to "restrain ourselves from using force" in most cases, as this would merely play into the Maoists' hands.

... But Army Needs More Equipment

¶10. (C) Panta thanked the U.S. for its support of the RNA, pointing to recent visits by PACOM commander Admiral Fallon, SCA DAS Donald Camp, and even A/DCM's as contributing to troop morale by demonstrating USG interest. Panta said the ammunition situation in his sector was unchanged since Camp's March visit, adding that his troops were adequately furnished with ammunition and had reserves in the division depot; any shortages at headquarters, he said, were "not my problem." He continued that he had a vast amount of territory to protect and badly needed more helicopters for troop transport, as well as night vision goggles for helicopter pilots and GPS systems. Panta also asked for more field training by the U.S. military, such as the "Balance Nail" exercises and training for up-and-coming officers such as Col. Bharat Malla, his Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics and Col. Purna Chandra Thapa, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations (both of whom participated in the meeting). He reiterated the RNA's respect for human rights, noting that the ICRC had "total access" to detainees and his command's full cooperation. Panta concluded by asserting that the U.S. and Nepal faced a common enemy in terrorism and should work together to defeat the Maoists and ensure they did not take advantage of Nepal's political parties, from whom "we have nothing to fear."

Police Claim They Act With Restraint

¶11. (C) A/DCM also met with Deepak Sing Thangden, Deputy Inspector General of Nepal Police for the Western Region, and Senior Superintendent of Police for Pokhara District, Nanendra Khaling. Thangden said he had taken up duties only a week previously and generally deferred to Khaling, who allowed to ten months' experience in the district. Both officials claimed the protestors in Pokhara were acting under "central direction" and the Maoists were infiltrating the city and provoking demonstrations. The police, they said, were acting according to law and were under instructions to try to "convince" protestors to act peacefully and disperse. The police, Thangden stressed, had no desire to "confront" the people. He referred to the killing of the protestor at the Nepal Telecom as an "isolated incident" and said that, in general, security forces in Pokhara had shown great restraint in the face of considerable provocation. (Note: The alleged beating of the Japanese tourist happened after this conversation. End note.)

National Human Rights Commission Has Different Take on Events

¶12. (C) A/DCM concluded his round of meetings in Pokhara by conferring with the acting director of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) regional office, Bishnu Prasad Kandel, and two of his colleagues. NHRC personnel, like the authorities, described the situation as "tense" and unprecedented. Unlike the authorities, however, they focused

on the number of arrests, which they said had gone from 12 on April 5 to more than 24 each on April 6 and 7, to more than 35 on April 8, with the trend line continuing upward. All of the top party leaders in Pokhara had been arrested the first day and all had subsequently been released, but many party workers remained in detention.

¶13. (C) The NHRC offered a different version of the events of April 8 culminating in the fatal shooting outside the Nepal Telecom building. Students from a university campus (the P.N. campus) in the northern part of the city had moved southward toward the city center, gathering at the Mahendra Chowk where they were joined by "thousands" of citizens. According to NHRC official Tej Man Shrestha, who claimed to have been an eyewitness, the crowd chanted slogans but threw no rocks at the Telecom building before three shots were fired at the crowd without any warning, resulting not only in the instant death of Dahal but the wounding of two other demonstrators, who were taken to the hospital. At this point, members of the crowd who did not immediately flee began throwing stones at the Telecom Building. The police then used tear gas to break up the crowd, which the NHRC officials observed was "exactly the reverse" order of what should have happened.

¶14. (C) In their rounds of the city, the NHRC officials said they had found "no evidence" of infiltration into demonstrations by Maoists and opined that the authorities were "making excuses" for their over-reliance on force by claiming that the Maoists were directing the protests. They noted that the demonstrations had gathered steam well before the Maoist leader issued his April 9 statement. Kandel said that recent events in Pokhara demonstrated that much more training was needed for the Armed Police Force, the Nepal Police and the common soldiers of the RNA. "Expert training" in human rights observance was needed from the outside, they maintained. The UNDP was supporting this to a limited extent in Nepal, but much more was needed. Kandel observed that Nepalis' civil rights were being "undermined by both sides" -- the authorities and the Maoists -- and added that NHRC

workers felt "exposed" to the wrath of both sides as they had been calling them both out publicly for violations of human rights. Kandel appealed for U.S. support for NHRC, which was threatened with virtual disbandment if EU funding ran out in the coming months, as expected, and no additional outside sources of support materialized. His colleagues pointed out that they had only one car to cover the entire region, and would ideally like to open sub-offices in outlying towns. Kandel said the previous day he had called the RNA and police in Butwal to appeal for the release of detained human rights activists and journalists and had ultimately succeeded, but the NHRC's efforts would have been easier had the organization had an office in that city.

Comment: A City in Shock

¶15. (C) Comment: Pokhara was in a state of shock when A/DCM visited. This was plain on the faces of stressed senior officials and security personnel, hotel workers who had to spend the night in their place of employment for lack of transportation home, and ordinary citizens whom A/DCM encountered. The universal hope was that the city's troubles would soon be over, but no one was able to predict with confidence when that would be. The senior civilian administrator seemed uncomfortable with the somewhat heavy-handed approach of the security forces, to say nothing of the continued presence of the King in his town. The major general commanding gave little indication of being in genuine touch with the situation, and the more he protested he was not a politician the more he came across as just that, in uniform. While we waited for curfew passes and such, we did observe at several regional command posts an integrated approach to force allocation and deployment among the three main security forces (RNA, Armed Police and Nepal Police) and, in many cases, sincere efforts by police commanders to

exercise restraint and fall back in the face of angry crowds.

Still, those efforts were lost in the general impression, fed by media reports, of a heavy-handed, occasionally brutal, government response to the anti-King demonstrations in the monarch's vacation home.

MORIARTY